



JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU: LEARNING THROUGH EMILE

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ABSTRACT

Jean Jaques Rousseau, though born in Geneva, is celebrated as one of France's most influential figures in literature and philosophy. Rousseau's personal experience with poverty, social inequality, controversial works and personal struggles played an important role in shaping his views on education and learning as a whole. Rousseau's educational ideas, mainly found in *Émile*, focus on new ways of teaching and learning.

His works, including the influential *Émile*, challenged traditional pedagogical methods, which we still use to this date, suggesting more natural and experience-based learning. His writings are still relevant, as we learn how to improve our teaching approach and build a student ready for the world. In today's educational landscape, his ideas resonate to support students' creativity, freedom, critical thinking, and emotional intelligence. His philosophy in *Émile* is linked to his broader philosophical views, especially his belief in the natural goodness of humans and how humans are corrupted by society, as mentioned in *The Social Contract*. In his works he promotes 'Negative Education,' which is a kind of self-centered education.

His philosophy also included some controversial ideas. While he promoted freedom and growth for boys, he had a very different view for girls. In *Émile*, he suggested that girls should be trained only for domestic life and to please men. Many people also argue that his ideas are hard to apply in real schools with large groups of students and limited resources.

Even after such criticisms, Rousseau's thoughts still influence modern education. His ideas help to shape a student-centered learning and the idea that children learn best when they are content, curious, and free. His work makes us think deeply about what education should really be.

KEYWORDS: Education, *Émile*, Negative Education, Creativity, Student-Centered Teaching

INTRODUCTION

Jean Jaques Rousseau was born in Geneva in 1712. The philosopher, born to Isaac Rousseau and Suzanne Bernard, left Geneva at age of sixteen and was influenced by a noblewoman Baronne de Warens. In 1728, he converted into Roman Catholicism in Turin. In Turin, he falsely accused his servant of stealing a ribbon, knowing that he was wrong. This incident left him scarred for years, as suggested by his autobiography. He began contributing to the *Encyclopédie* de Diderot et d'Alembert in Paris in 1744. In 1755, he published *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* (Discourse on Inequality) in which he talks about social inequality and its origin. Later, Rousseau parted his way with the *Encyclopédistes* during ideological differences. This happened simultaneously while he was working on his three major works, which highlighted the spiritual origin of man's soul and universe. Soon after, he published his very successful novel, *Julie or the New Heloise* (*Julie ou la nouvelle Héloïse*). This book describes the beauty of countryside in Switzerland, which sparked a craze for alpine scenery among the masses. In April 1762, he published *Du Contrat Social* (*The Social Contract*), helping inspire political reforms in Europe, especially in France. *Émile*, the

main topic of our discussion, was published in May 1762. It is a treatise on the nature of man and education. It influenced the French Revolution by encouraging ideas of freedom, equality and moral based education. This was banned and burned in France and Geneva in 1762 because of religious criticism and challenges to traditional pedagogical norms. *Émile* sparked outrage in the French Parliament, causing an arrest warrant to be issued against him and forcing him to flee to Switzerland. After these incidents, he accepted an invitation from David Hume -a British philosopher to live in England, however their relationship suffered as Rousseau grew paranoid and believed that David was part of a conspiracy against him. Thanks to his influential friends, he was granted permission to enter France under the condition that he avoided controversy in 1767. He spent his later years working on autobiographical works such as *Les Confessions* (*The Confessions*) and *Les Rêveries du Promeneur Solitaire* (*The Reveries of the Solitary Walker*), revealing his struggle with mental health and reflections on life and society.

Studying Rousseau's views on education is essential because his ideas provide a framework for modern pedagogical

approaches. He emphasized on natural development of children and supported creativity and exploration over rote-based learning. Implementing his principles into the application of teaching will lead to more student-centered teaching that brings better outcomes and learning experience. People unfamiliar with Rousseau's writing might find it difficult to believe that his statements come from the same person when considered within his broader philosophy. To appreciate his philosophy, it is essential to explore the range of his statements. In one of his works, he also says, "Ambition, avarice, tyranny, the mistaken foresight of fathers, their neglect, their harshness, are a hundredfold more harmful to the child than the blind affection of the mother" (Rousseau, 1921) arguing that societal pressure and bad parental behavior are much more harmful than a mother's blind affectionate care. Regarding this, in *Émile* he compares a child to a young tree that needs protection and care to grow strong. He mentions early education being the most important and is a woman's work –the mother in this context. They must create a safe space for children, protecting them from societal pressure and focusing on uniqueness and natural growth. Therefore, parents should entertain their children's curiosity and goodness.

God makes all things good; man meddles with them and they become evil.

Jean-Jaques Rousseau's this statement talks about his belief in the natural goodness of humans and how the influence of society corrupts them. He argues that everything is pure and in harmony, but the human interference of greed and pressure creates an imbalance. In the context of education, he believes that a child's innate behavior, learning, and interests are suppressed by traditional pedagogical methods. He advocated for a return to 'nature' by promoting curiosity, freedom, and moral development. This challenges rigid and authoritarian teaching styles and encourages teachers to act as a guide rather than controller.

"The heart of Rousseau's theory of education: "negative education" or the process of de- or un-socializing individuals and of putting them in touch with the nature of things rather than with the various distortions produced by traditional education" (Lindsay, 2016, p. 487). This statement provides a brief understanding of one of the core concepts i.e negative education, in *Émile*. It "consists not at all in teaching virtue or truth but in securing the heart from vice and the mind from error" (Rousseau 1979, 93). It is crucial to understand from the point of view of Jean-Jaques that, once again, humans are naturally good and have all the good qualities. Therefore, repeatedly teaching virtues or truths is useless. Instead it is significantly better to protect learners from the errors of mind, greed, pride and selfishness.

"Now I consider those who would prevent the birth of the passions almost as foolish as those who would destroy them, and those who think this has been my object hitherto are greatly mistaken." Herein, he emphasizes the importance of passion in a person, arguing that education should not suppress passion instead guide it towards something better.

Give your scholar no verbal lessons; he should be taught by experience alone; never punish him, for he does not know what it is to do wrong; never make him say: "Forgive me," for he does not know how to do you wrong. Wholly unmoral in his actions, he can do nothing morally wrong, and he deserves neither punishment nor reproof.

Rousseau's view in *Émile* insists that children should not be taught through verbal lessons, instead they should learn through experience. He also advises against punishing them, as they lack maturity at a young age. In addition, asking a child to apologize or say "Forgive me" is meaningless in Rousseau's view that a child is incapable of doing something morally incorrect. Furthermore, he highlights the importance of viewing children as individuals with different development stages. He segregates these stages as infancy, boyhood, adolescence, and adulthood, each one requiring their unique educational approach. For educational theory, this needs the goals of education be formed in terms of the present, and not the future. Rousseau has no intention of directly preparing his young pupil for a particular kind of work, rather, by preparing him for manhood. (Collins, 1976)

"A woman's education must therefore be planned in relation to man. To be pleasing in his sight, to win his respect and love, to train him in childhood, to tend him in manhood, to counsel and console, to make his life pleasant and happy, these are the duties of woman for all time, and this is what she should be taught while she is young."

Naturally, Rousseau's views on women's education in "*Émile*" have also been criticized. Mary Wollstonecraft, a feminist philosopher, strongly disagreed with his ideas on women's nature and education. This disagreement was not just about gender issues, but originated from moral psychology and the possibility of true civilization (Reuter, 2014). While some interpret his work as anti-feminist, others argue that he exculpates women by rejecting masculine authority and criticizing the education of women (Piau-Gillot, 1981). Jean-Jaques Rousseau's emphasis on 'natural' and romanticized learning was heavily criticized for being impractical. Although his ideas encourage individual experience and freedom, they overlook the challenges of implementation on a broader scale, particularly in urban areas where access to nature may not be feasible. Furthermore, Rousseau's philosophy contains significant opposition. He suggested that children should grow free from societal rules, yet he created a strict educational framework for women. These inconsistencies and the disregard for societal progress have come under scrutiny due to their practicality.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, while "*Émile*" is recognized as a foundational work in education philosophy, it has also been a source of controversy. The book's ideas continue to be examined and debated in discussions on education, gender equality, and political philosophy, showing its high relevance in academic discourse (Chandler, 2016). The idea of freedom is described

as “an ideal continually contested” and is seen as a guiding principle in Rousseau’s writings (Mcdonald, 2010).

Rousseau’s “Émile” and his broader educational philosophy have had a profound and lasting impact on pedagogical thought, sparking both admiration and critique from subsequent thinkers (Chandler, 2016; Griffiths, 2014). His ideas on education as a means of producing social justice and fostering individual self-worth have been particularly influential (Chandler, 2016). His ideas on education have had a lasting impact. He believed that education should be natural and promote creativity and critical thinking. Some have argued that his vision was impractical and restrictive. Despite these criticisms, Rousseau’s work remains influential. By understanding and applying Rousseau’s principle, we can create an environment that nurtures each student’s unique abilities and supports curiosity to learn. This approach can lead to a more effective and outcome-based education, preparing students for a well-rounded life.

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